

## Viewpoint: Europe's Quiet Integration

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume VI, Issue 1 (January 2007)

by [Zachary Shore](#)

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Lately European leaders seem seized by acute Islamophobia. First President Jacques Chirac perceived a threat to French identity posed by schoolgirls decked in head scarves. Then Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain spoke of outlawing the veil from public view. Now, after calling for a nationwide burka ban, Christian Democrats in the Netherlands have won the most seats in Parliament.

Most Western European nations are tightening their immigration laws while fretting over free speech in cartoons, plays and print. All the while, right-wing xenophobic parties are on the rise across the Continent. One year after riots set French housing projects ablaze, Europe appears to be shifting sharply to the right.

Just below the news media's radar screens, however, a countertrend is under way, which promises a kinder, gentler and potentially more successful approach to Europe's Muslim quandary.

While right-leaning ministers at the national level are talking tough to Muslims, progressive officials and private citizens at local levels are spearheading innovative programs to aid Muslim integration.

In Berlin, Renée Abul-Ella runs Al-Dar (The Home), an organization dedicated to helping Arabic women and their families integrate into German society. Al-Dar provides language, typing and computer training to Muslim women and counsels them on issues they cannot discuss in most contexts. Abul-Ella told me that nearly every family she knows has had some incidence of domestic violence.

Al-Dar works with fathers, too, some of whom have prevented their daughters from attending school. "We don't make the people who come to us feel ashamed about their culture," Abul-Ella said. "Instead, we show them that what is appropriate in one country may not be appropriate in another.

At the other end of Germany, Michael Blume is at work in Stuttgart pushing through a series of radical policy shifts in the state of Baden-Württemberg. Blume had not even finished his doctoral thesis on comparative religion when he received a call from the state's minister-president. It was just after the 9/11 attacks, and the minister-president was repeatedly being asked about his

government's policies toward Muslims, who comprise 5.7 percent of Baden- Württemberg's population, and whose numbers are swelling fast. He had no policies, and there was no one on his staff to handle it.

Having heard about Blume's provocative research, the minister-president invited the young Ph.D. student to tea, and in the course of their discussion asked Blume to join his staff. Since then, Blume has initiated a pilot program in 12 public schools serving large concentrations of Muslim children. With the schoolteachers' and parents' consent, these schools now offer classes in Islam as well as the usual courses on Christianity. Religion has always been taught in German schools, but the study of Islam had never been part of the curriculum. The aim is to encourage a sense of Muslim inclusion within German society and discourage the all-too- common development of a parallel society existing outside the mainstream.

Further west, the French city of Strasbourg is also experimenting with new integration strategies. Here sits the European Parliament, with its ornate marble stairways and plush voting chambers, and the Council of Europe, devoted to ensuring human rights and social cohesion throughout the continent. But travel just a few minutes to the other side of Strasbourg, to the neighborhood of Neuhof, and you will see dilapidated housing, shattered windows and crumbled streets.

Drugs have plagued the neighborhood, but the city is attempting to revitalize it, not just by constructing decent housing. Outside the Ecole Maternelle Reuss, scores of immigrant children play tag with all the boisterous energy you would find in any playground. Behind the playground, a more serious course is under way inside a prefab concrete two-room structure where the mothers are learning French. Many came from Bangladesh, Turkey, Morocco or Algeria with little education. All say they are grateful to learn the language, and their courses are paid for by the city if they cannot afford to pay themselves.

These are just a few of Europe's smart steps toward Muslim integration. There are many others. In Berlin, the Aziz Nesin Europa elementary school is completely bilingual. Half of all courses are taught in German; the other half in Turkish. Most policy makers insist that only by mastering European languages can immigrants and their children prosper. The Aziz Nesin school is proving that early bilingual education enhances cognitive ability, fosters curiosity about other cultures, and may even improve academic performance. And the school is not just for Turkish children. It is mixed between Turkish-German and German kids, fostering bonds between cultures at a very early age.

Tough talk and burka bans may win votes at the national level, but municipal governments cannot afford to let their Muslim residents remain closed off from the community and open to extremism. If any of the progressive local projects succeed, they will eventually be adopted nationwide. Europe's leaders have no other choice. If they keep fiddling with the politics of exclusion, Paris will again be burning.

*Originally published by the International Herald Tribune on November 28, 2006.*

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